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SUBJECT: LINKING ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH - EPA'S HELI PROGRAM

1. Summary: EPA's Children's Environmental Health Indicators (CEHI) program and the Health and Environment Linkage Initiative (HELI) program, co-chaired by UN Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), seek to assess the health costs of environmental factors and ultimately to prevent environmentally-caused illness through more informed policy making. WHO convened a Middle East regional HELI/CEHI consultation in Amman March 28-31 to assess progress and share information. End Summary.

EPA And Canada Launch Programs at WSSD

2. US EPA, an early leader in linking health and environment, launched the Children's Environmental Health Indicators (CEHI) program at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). CEHI focuses specifically on environmental impacts on children's health. At the same time, Canada launched the Health and Environment Linkage Initiative (HELI) program. HELI is now run in a unique "joint secretariat" relationship between UNEP and WHO. WHO also runs EPA's CEHI program, and WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO) is managing a CEHI pilot program. EPA funds CEHI at \$500,000 over 5 years, or \$100,000 per year. Canada funds HELI at \$1 million per year for 3 years.

Attendees from Middle East, Maghreb, Gulf, Iran

3. WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO) held a regional HELI/CEHI consultation in Amman on March 28-31 to review Jordan's HELI pilot project, which looks at the relationship between water consumption and health. Uganda and Thailand also have HELI pilot projects on other topics. The intent is to scale up the programs after the appropriate tools and plans are developed. In addition to regional consultations, there will be periodic global HELI/CEHI meetings. Participants at the Amman HELI/CEHI consultation came from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Syria, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, USA, Canada, Kuwait, Egypt, WHO, UNEP and Thailand. (Note: Israel belongs to WHO's European Regional Office, and does not participate in WHO meetings under the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office.)

Prevention Cheaper Than Treatment

4. According to Pierre Quiblier from UNEP, environmental factors cause 25 percent of all illness, primarily in developing countries. HELI seeks to prove that environmentally sound policies contribute to income and development through better health, and that it is cheaper to prevent environmentally caused illnesses than to treat them. The first job of the HELI group is to identify information tools to prove these assertions. Each country defines its own agenda and needs, which are often multi-sectoral, using HELI tools. Participants emphasized the need for practical, locally oriented results, not more studies.

Health Impact Assessment - An Important New Tool

5. HELI's strategy is to generate information for decision-makers that show the health costs of policy options so that those costs are considered at the policy planning phases, not ignored up front and managed later as side effects. A "health impact assessment," similar to the environmental impact assessment, is one tool for identifying the health impacts of individual environmental actions and policies. An economic approach to measuring the health outcomes of environmental factors seems to resonate best with policymakers, according to speakers at the meeting. HELI seeks to tailor their processes and tools to fit decision-makers' needs.

Wide Range of Factors Can Degrade Health

6. Environmental factors that can affect health include air pollution, smoking, chemicals in paints, household cleaners, pests and vermin, lead from paint and tailpipe emissions, car accidents, impure water, water scarcity, exposure to pesticides and fertilizers, noise, and proximity to solid waste. For example, bad water makes kids sick with diarrhea, leading to fewer school days, higher medical expenses, lost household income as parents take time to care for sick children, and ultimately to developmentally stunted children and lost lives.

Health-Environment Issue Lacks a Bureaucratic Champion

7. According to several meeting participants, governmental and policy-making bodies have been slow to link environment and

health. There has been a "not our problem" reaction to environmental health by both health departments and environment departments, leaving environmental health issues without a clear bureaucratic lead agency. HELI/CEHI participants are working hard to overcome this problem. Even in the United States, according to EPA specialists, pediatricians receive only a few hours of training about environmental effects on children's health. As a result, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and EPA have developed a unique collaboration to create eleven Environmental Health Specialty Units in the United States. The mission of these centers is to train pediatricians about health effects from environmental factors.

Low-End Users Need to Use More Water, Not Less

18. Dr. Amer Jabarin, a HELI advisor from the University of Jordan, discussed Jordan's HELI pilot project on the relationship between water consumption and health. He said that there is a minimum level of water consumption from a health viewpoint. He said that people at the low end of the water consumption scale might not be using enough water to stay healthy (through such things as hand washing, bathing, waste disposal, washing vegetables and washing utensils). While conservation at the high end of the consumption scale should be encouraged, he said, it might be useful, even in an arid country like Jordan, to encourage more water consumption among people with the lowest water consumption levels. Consuming water among those people may make a net contribution to national income through better health, even though the water and the energy used to pump the water add costs.

19. Comment: The Health Impact Assessment may become an indispensable legal tool to protect public health, just as the Environmental Impact Assessment has become a standard tool for environmental protection.

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